Response to Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs public consultation, run on behalf of the National Library of Ireland, regarding digital legal deposit

In my capacity as the Director of NUI Galway’s Centre for Excellence in Learning & Teaching, I would like to affirm my support of the policy of collecting, preserving and making available the published output of the nation being extended to include all contemporary publication formats, including online digital formats.

NUI Galway is a successful, research-active university which whilst comprehensive in its coverage of all the major academic disciplines, also fulfils a distinctive and unique role in support of the cultural heritage of the West of Ireland and the Irish language. Its areas of research expertise also includes Biomedical Science and Technologies, Web & Data science, Human rights, Environmental Science, and Applied Social Sciences.

Please find my response to the public consultation outlined below.

1. Should the policy of collecting, preserving and making available the published output of the nation for the benefit of the public be extended to include all contemporary publication formats of Irish interest including online digital formats e.g., .ie websites?

Yes, the policy should be extended. Within a year of publication, 50% of web resources are gone or unrecognizable. This means government publications, online newspapers and websites documenting all aspects of life in the 21st Century will be lost to future researchers.

Many countries have already amended legal deposit legislation to incorporate deposit of the published digital output of that country e.g. websites and electronic publications. This is digital legal deposit. Of the 28 members of the European Union with legal deposit legislation, approximately 60% of countries already have digital legal deposit legislation in place. This would include long established member countries such as the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Spain, Sweden, and Denmark, and newer members such as Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. These countries are already actively collecting this digital material.

The extension of this policy to include all contemporary formats, including online digital formats is a necessity in this era of a changing publications landscape. It is an important precursor to amended digital legal deposit legislation.

Further, it is an essential requirement for education and research that such material is preserved and accessible.

2. What issues arise if a policy extension on digital legal deposit is not provided for?

If the policy extension is not provided for, it will be harder for Irish people to access, free of charge, the total published output of the nation. The balance between digital and physical material will shift,
and eventually there will be more digital material produced than physical, and none of this digital material will be collected and preserved for future research. The exclusion of such a large proportion of cultural and factual output will result in a significantly distorted historical record, not just one which is incomplete, but one which will undermine future historical, analytical, and cultural research, with an increasingly deteriorating position relative to the collections of other nations and regions (thus also impeding comparative studies, intercultural work, etc).

3. What are the benefits if a policy extension on digital legal deposit is provided for?

It is clear that digital publications will be at least as important as printed books for future generations to understand life in Ireland in the 21st century, and that, existing in only a ‘virtual’ sense, they are more ‘fragile’ than printed books - so we need to capture them now. They are important to researchers and citizens alike as they document the local as well as the national, the creators and innovators as well as the more formal machinery of the state. All aspects of life in the 21st century will increasingly be documented in digital form, in blogs, video materials, and digital newspapers. The extension of policy, to facilitate amendments to current legislation to enable the capture of this material will ensure collection, preservation and access to the documentary and intellectual heritage of 21st century Ireland and to fulfil our moral and ethical obligations to our fellow European and international partners.

I therefore support the proposal as outlined in the public consultation and urge the Minister of Arts Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs to consider and act on this response.

Yours sincerely,

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